

**Letters Between Fools**  
*or*  
**(Words.)**

*Jon Prapuolenis*

Dear Reginald,

I do not know who you are. It is rather a perplexing situation I find myself in. I feel the unshakable compulsion to write to you. I wonder if you are aware of me. We have never formally been introduced, or at least I do not believe we have. I watched the flowers outside my window today. Not all day, but a fair portion of it. There is more to the story, but I fear I have become far too familiar already.

Cautiously,  
Fredrick Von :

\*

Dear Mr. Von Colon,

Your letter caught me by surprise. However, I do find myself intrigued. Do not fear yourself too familiar or forward as I am inundated with the bizarre and backwards. Your short letter was a nice break from the monotony.

You have a window? Or, what excites me more, you have seen a flower? In most botanical pursuits I find myself poorly rounded. I have primarily dealt with small hedges and the odd fichus (a small tree technically, if I am correct in my beliefs), though I must admit I have seen relatively few flowers. Should this sadden me? Perhaps. You know the expression, I presume, "Light a man on fire; he will likely never rub the petals of a lilac across his earlobes." It is merely an old wives tale as far as I can figure. But this is unimportant. Please, tell me more about the flower outside your window good sir!

Intrigued,  
Reginold

\*\*

Dear Reginald,

It warms my heart to know you do not think me a hybridization between a bearcat, a large pink polar bear, and a peacock with a severe case of mange. Or perhaps I read too far between the lines? In any case, it seems fitting that I should inform you about the passing of my flowers.

As I had previously told you, they sat just outside my window. What I neglected to mention, as I felt it imprudent to bring up at the time, was the fact that my flowers sprouted from the back of a turtle. The turtle is real, however, the flowers are fake. He is small, gray, and severely arthritic. We all call him Duck though I once saw him respond to Goose. He originally found the flowers in a heap at the foot of a large lanky tree. They were real then, though that does not much matter in the grand scheme of things. If there is one thing I can say about Mr. Duck esq. (his proper title) was that he absolutely abhorred Polka.

On a sunny day last Wednesday Duck found himself in the middle of my gravel garden. He was a creature of leisure, I'm sure you would agree. Across the garden there was, and still is, a small road. Most days this road went unused, but last Wednesday this was not the case. A wild Pianist riding a stolen xylophone rolled rapidly by. As he bumped along he sung what I can only assume sounded like Polka to Duck. Absolutely scandalized by this, Mr. Duck, rest his bespectacled soul, burst into flame. The Fire Marshall was unable to put him out for hours, full bladder and all.

Do you think this reflects poorly on my future prospects? I have been reading about the Zodiac and Astrology recently and as best

as I can understand these events seem to represent ill omens.

Pessimistically,  
Fredrick Von :

\*\*\*

Dear Mr. Von Colon,

I find the news of Mr. Duck's esq. demise most distressing. Planter, Pioneer, and Polkahater; he will no doubt be sorely missed. I am not one for consoling words on most occasions. Generally it seems more heart-felt if I simply attempt to communicate my condolences through a series of emotional sounds. Attached to this letter is an 8-track which contains some utterances I hope you will find comforting during these trying times. Track number 32 "Frrrngghfgteeephaaago" is my personal favorite.

If this gesture does not lick kindly your bleeding heart, I submit the following parable: (not your name)

There once was a small fish. He feared the large ocean, but not for the reasons one would assume a tiny tasty tidbit of a snack might fear the sea. He could hardly leave his swanky condominium near the wayward sandbar for fear of immolation. This fish, curiously named Duck as well, was not afraid of drowning, impellation, mastication, or even steam frying with a sprig of parsley. Only the idea of being engulfed in flames was dreadful to Duck. After many nights of pitifully sobbing into the breast of an urchin Duck devised a plan. He fired a small nuclear device into a passing oil tanker in a misplaced act of sexual frustration. The sea burned for days. Steve Buscemi shed a single golden tear. After that Duck rose to prominence in the wide ocean, becoming the head of a cult.

Thus ends the tale. Do you not see? The fish was a metaphor for a slightly larger fish. The boat? A plane! And Steve Buscemi as a slightly hairier Steve Buscemi. I trust you will take this all into consideration come election time.

Proudly,  
Reginold

\*\*\*\*

Dear Reginald,

I am put back at ease. You have my deepest gratitude, truly you do. I would like to show you some of my poetry. I write when I feel particularly ill at ease with the geopolitical climate. Also when I am a bit dyspeptic. Below I have scribed one dedicated to you. I hope it is to your liking. Forgive me for the rhyme scheme; it is still a bit of a work in progress.

Emotions felt whilst Sneezing

Bright moonlight in my eyes at half past noon,  
I eat a sandwich which crunches to much atop this dune.

Finding chips is just as nice.

Dice.

(this is where I free style)

Broken promises, heartfelt lies.

Cheese a la mode, Woolf in my pants.

Who you are

Going

T

O

O

Call?

Damn Straight. Streams.

Marshmallows are edible,

Acorns less so.

My dreams scream

bad pillow talk.

Are you a robot?

Do you think I will ever make it as a ballerina?

Uncertain,  
Fredrick Von :

\*\*\*\*\*

Dear Mr. Von Colon,

Your poetry has stirred within me a deep forgotten feeling. However, I fear it is still forgotten, as I cannot put my finger on what it is. Perhaps my appendix? Or the church mouse I consumed may not have expired quite yet. I will have to ponder this mystery as I contemplate your verses.

Attached to this letter I found a small blinking disc. Your previous letters were not so sporadically luminous so I wonder why this one was. As I read the poem I tapped my big toe to the beat of the light. I could not tell for certain if the disc was meant to constrain my reading or brighten the page. It seems presumptuous to have attached such a thing to a work so pure. Certainly this is out of character for you Mr. Von Colon.

Disgruntled,  
Reginold

\*\*\*\*\*

Dear Reginold,

What disc? The round and the flat are two elements that I strive to keep separate in my life. Either something is round or it is flat. Those cocky discs think they can have it all. I shall not even begin on what I think of blinking.

So needless to say I did not include the disc. In fact I am at a loss for how it came to be attached to the letter. Perhaps you should dispose of the disc. I have a bad feeling about it.

Concerned,  
Fredrick Von :

\*\*\*\*\*

Dear Mr. Von ;,

Your name is confusing to write. In other news Reginold has expired. Very much like milk left out in the sun; he has been shot in a tragic Skee-ball accident. I am inspector Artfelt Jaundice and I have some questions to ask you.

1. Where were you?
2. How aren't you?
3. If when how now brown cow  
chica bow wow.
4. Why!
5. You claim to hate discs but  
your spine is full of them?
6. When did you burst from  
Reginold chest causing it (his chest)  
to suffer a severe decrease in blood  
retention?
7. Who gave you the disc.

Please address your confession to Detective Limey at the police station. Technically Detective Limey is just my nick name, I love limes, but that's what it says on my mailbox. I love citrus so damn much, you have no idea.

Officially,  
Art

\*\*\*\*\*

Dear Limey,  
No.

Regrettably,  
Fredrick Von :

## Chapter One: Friday

*Jon Prapuolenis*

5:54 a.m. I wake up already late. I tell myself it won't matter, that my dreams were probably a better use of the 9 minutes than getting up. I'm probably about half right. In the grand scheme of things, the 9 extra minutes of dreaming, untold eons on the grassy plain I imagined myself skipping across moments before, probably was the more fulfilling option. However, pragmatically, it was a stupid decision.

By waiting those 9 minutes my entire day was likely thrown off. No one would say what I did was pressing or important, it just took a very predictable amount of time. Once I woke up I had exactly 45 minutes to be out the door. That was unchanging. What I did with the time between leaving my warm covers and sitting down in my crappy car was unimportant.

Most days I spent 5 minutes staring at the ceiling while imagining how cold my dirty linoleum floor would be. After putting my feet down on the unimaginably frigid floor, 17 steps and 3 minutes are spent walking to the bathroom and waiting for the shower to warm up. Once under the warm drool that my decrepit showerhead provides, I have twelve minutes to clean up. I only really need 2, so the remaining 10 minutes are primarily utilized slowly rotating while contemplating when I last cleaned my bath towel. Those 10 minutes are indispensable; they infuse my morning with a profound sense of calm. From there I have 5 minutes to dress and 20 to eat. What I wear is decided for me, uniform shirt, pants without holes, and closed-toe shoes. What I eat is inconsequential as long as it gets me out the door by 6:30.

Some days I would sleep until 6:25, getting up in a whirl of panic and bits of clothing as I hurried to the car. Some days, having showered the night before, I would spend thirty minutes preparing a full and hearty breakfast. It really didn't matter as long as I was out by 6:30.

Today I left at 6:39. Being late can lead to a whole list of complications. For surgeons, missing the window for an organ transplant can lead to increases in insurance rates. For a pilot, lowering the landing gear too late can lead to a sharp increase of burning debris on the runway. For me, being late means missing Jake outside the back door having a smoke. It's not that Jake and I were close at all, or that I really loved the smell of Newport's, but while he was outside he propped the door open and I could easily slip inside. After 6:53 he would return to slicing produce and I would have to pound on the door until someone let me in. Inevitably it would be Sam. I fucking hate Sam. I have no idea why exactly. I try to keep it to myself, but my loathing of that man is one of the few things I was sure of in this world.

At 6:57 Sam stood staring at me as I clocked in.

"Not too bad outside, huh?" I asked Sam, trying not to notice that he was staring at the small smudge on my nametag.

"Your tag is dirty," Sam stated.

"Yeah, I got some chocolate ice cream on it yesterday. There was a big rush, some event downstairs or something. I must have made 20 milkshakes back to back. Of course these people never want to wait so I was throwing them together as fast as possible. Chocolate, Strawberry, Vanilla, all flying around, 3 blending at a time. I'm surprised I don't have any behind my ears." Sam stared at me quietly for half a moment past it being awkward.

"Cool story bro." And with that he walked away to sweep the ceiling or whatever it was that he did around here. Through my entire story Sam had done nothing but stare blankly at my right eyebrow. He didn't smile, he didn't frown, nor did he have the decency to look bored. In all my time working at the Café I don't think I ever saw his face arranged in anything other than an impassive stare. Managing to land so perfectly neutral would have been impressive if it didn't aggravate me so much. I tried fruitlessly to figure out why as I began the morning prep work.

Pushing the chain barricade open, I looked out across the food court to see who had already gotten their signs illuminated. As usual, Betty's was up. Their gate was open and, by the smell, it seemed Catherine had already made the first pot of coffee. I flipped on the Café sign and headed over to Betty's.

The proprietor, who was also the manager, the only employee, and my good friend, looked up from one of the steaming machines surrounding her and waved.

"Hey there, pretty nice out today, huh?" She said.

"I know right? If it stays like this I might not mind driving up here so much."

Catherine nodded sagely and began making my drink of choice. She was a small woman, more than halfway through her 50's. It was impressive just how nimbly she got everything in the small shop whirring, grinding, and shooting steam all at once. A twist of the espresso filter here, a few buttons pressed there, and with an alarming blast of steam my drink was done.

Back when I used to work in the coffee shop with her, I caught more than my share of steam jets to the stomach. Catherine seemed able to control half of

the machines by thought alone, like some coffee-based wizard. On the other hand, my greatest achievement while there was the day I managed to reassemble the espresso machine I may have caused to spontaneously and energetically disassemble.

Catherine places my drink on the counter.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Probably a lot, but nothing for the drink."

"Five finger discount?"

"Nope, ex-employee. Plus, it took all 10 to make that incredibly manly drink."

"Hey, don't make fun of my Frappa-Cappuccino Deluxe with whip cream and sprinkles." My second greatest achievement while working at Betty's was inventing the Frappa-Cappuccino Deluxe, or Frappa-Cappa Del for short. I don't have to explain myself to anyone, that thing is delicious.

"That thing is alarming."

"I know, it's great. You really should put it on the menu."

"I think I have an ethical responsibility not to. It's essentially diabetes in a cup."

"You're between a McDonalds and a Panda Express, you have an ethical smokescreen when it comes to nutrition."

"Uh huh." She smiled and I took a sip of my drink. It was magical, as always. I glanced at the clock.

"Well, I better get back to work."

"How's it going over there? Brandon hasn't told me how you've been doing on the mixer." Brandon, her friend and my boss, was essentially a 5 star chef working in a prison cafeteria. His food was something like a super model dressed in assorted cans of wasp poison; it seemed dangerous, but when you got to the bare essentials, it was spectacular. Or something like that. Anyway, Catherine

and Brandon went way further back than I really wanted to know. When it became apparent that, for the safety of the mall in general, I should not be making coffee, she got me a job at the Café.

"You know, things are okay over at the Café. I'm much better at shakes than with the espresso machine."

"Uh huh, the what?"

"The shakes?"

"Nope, the place you are currently employed not to destroy things."

"The Café?"

"I'm pretty sure that's not its official name."

"Well, you know, it's part of the name."

"They don't call Burger King just burger last time I checked."

"They really should, it could probably make for a fun set of commercials."

"What do you say when someone comes up to your register?"

"Hello."

"And?"

"People here are pretty rude, they generally just declare they want a milkshake or some Lemon Pepper Cod." Catherine half suppressed a smile.

"Are you going to say it or am I going to have to get Brandon to make you?" I rolled my eyes but acquiesced.

"Hello Madam—"

"Nice touch."

"Welcome to the Ice Lolly and Juicy-O Café, what can I get for you today?"

"Was that so bad?"

"Worse."

"It's not the worst name I've ever heard for a place."

"No, it's like two of the worst combined into one."

"Well, you guys do sell ice cream and orange juice." Laughed Catherine.

"I would have been fine with Ice Orange Café, but why did the fruit have to

be abbreviated so abruptly? And where did the Lolly even come from?"

Catherine just shook her head.

"Lolly. I'm going to be thinking of that word all day," I mumbled.

7:15 found me back on task. Every morning I prepared the line for the servers. Utensils set out, grill drip pan filled, lemons cut, ranch divided into portion cups, bread unwrapped, and whatever else needed to be done. My favorite, and most time consuming task, was filling the ranch portion cups. It didn't matter what the entrée of the day was, we went through a stupid amount of ranch.

I stared at 100 tiny plastic cups, empty and expecting. The squeeze bottle that I filled with ranch could get between 30 to 33 filled before it needed to be refilled. Each jug could fill the bottle about 4 1/2 times before it was emptied. I don't know how many jugs it took to kill the big barrel in the freezer. I have to say, I'm perversely curious at this point. It has filled 42 jugs since I started counting and we're still on the same barrel.

It is a strangely calming experience filling the cups. Squirt, move, squirt, move. Methodical, robotic, extrudelicious. It took until about 8:00a.m. on an average day to get all the cups filled, lidded, and put in the cooler under the counter. During that time I could let my mind wander. Today, like most Fridays, I could see the rest of my day unfold in front of me. The rest of my prep work, the odd early customer, the lunch rush on the register, the odd shake, my lunch break, sweeping and mopping behind the counter, the odd customer, clock out, maybe dinner, friends, drinks, games, an average Friday.

It was all fairly predictable, on and on, again and again. It would be a more

comforting idea if it didn't make me so uneasy.

As I stopped on cup number 95 to refill the bottle, I caught sight of Lawrence Price. Maybe this wouldn't be another Friday after all. It was a Mr. Price day, those were unpredictable.

Every other element of the jobs I've had, hell my life, always seemed to rest inside a set of predictable averages. 4 minutes to shave, 14 seconds to tie my shoes, 7 weeks for a relationship to fall through, 27 hours to beat an average console game on easy, 17 minutes to eat lunch, 13 to deposit it later (this being a ratio I'm secretly quite proud of). But Mr. Price never falls within the bell curve of my expectations.

Mr. Price replaced the old janitor when he quit or died a year ago. That day, there had been a lull in the lunch rush and I looked across the many occupied tables to see the upper most peak of Price's untamable white hair seemingly rise from the floor as the escalator carried him up into the food court. His hair would have been strange enough on it's own, something like cotton candy and adding a good 6 inches to his already impressive height. It would have looked at home on an 80-year-old mad scientist. However, it clashed severely with a soft face that couldn't be older than thirty-three. His eyes were slightly to dim and slightly too slow to move from his watch to the floor as he came to the top of the escalator. He then proceeded to make his way straight to the nearest trashcan and began to remove the bag.

This surprised me. I had never before seen a man in a suit collect mall trash bags. But there he was, still in finery, when later that day he returned to sweep and mop. Still in his cream colored suit with a matching vest. Beyond the suit nothing was consistent. Sometimes I'd

find him mopping right outside the Café first thing in the morning for days in a row, and the next week I'd only see him pull out a mop as I was leaving for the day. There seemed to be no order in which he cleaned the food court. Trash first, then sweeping then mopping, or backwards, or no sweeping. Front to back, back to front, zig-zaging from corner to corner. Starting from the middle and working out. It was unclear what his routine was, if he even had one. At least not one I saw. Some days or weeks, I wouldn't see Mr. Price at all, though everything always seemed to get clean.

Before today it had been nearly a month since I had seen him and his fancy suits. He approached the trashcan in a lime green pinstriped suit and began to remove the bag when he stopped suddenly and pulled out a cell phone. He listened for a few moments before he dropped the bag back into the can. He seemed to be listening intently, brow furrowed.

"Excuse me!?" A small woman in an outrageously pink sweater with a noxious look on her face half yelled, half stated, a foot in front of me. I jumped to attention.

"Hello, welcome to--"

"Is your Almond Cod Medley vegetarian?"

"Huh?"

"Is there any meat in it?" She asked impatiently.

"Well it's got carrots, beets, fish--"

"Oh. Well. Never mind."

"Huh?" She didn't seem to hear as she hustled aggressively towards the pretzel stand. I glanced back towards the trash, but Price was gone. He was nowhere to be seen. I resigned myself to another average Friday.

The rest of the day went by slowly and uneventfully. By 4:00 I was more than ready for my shift to end. I had already

swept the back, washed the counter, and in general gotten nearly everything ready to close. The last thing on my checklist for the day was collecting plastic trays from the top of trashcans to be cleaned for tomorrow. As I grabbed two of the trays, a small black moleskin notebook fell out from between them. I picked it up and examined it. It was fairly rough looking, about 4 inches tall by 2 1/2 wide. I was intrigued by what it was doing there. I flipped its front-page open. It read: Property of Lawrence Price.

**Madagascar?**  
*Jon Prapuolenis*

We four had been playing games for years. Tonight they all agreed the game would be Risk. A game of dice, and some strategy, it provides ample opportunity to talk and drink. Naturally, it had become our go-to favorite whenever no new game could be found. By 9 p.m. everyone had arrived. We poured our drinks and selected our army colors. Charlie, Sarah, Steve, and I were ready to do what we had done many nights before; take over the world.

The game sat on a particleboard slab which might have been a ping-pong table in a past life. The run-down piece of furniture had been stripped of all paint or finish and came complete with more than its fair share of splinters. The corner where I preferred to seat myself looked like it had been masticated by a truckasaurus. I rescued it from a local curb to serve on nights like these. It sat in a place of honor at the center of my tiny apartment.

Charlie sat down next to me, his curly hair wild as ever. Steven plopped down across from Charlie, with his collar popped and an overfull glass of vodka. Sarah slid into her seat across from me, smoothing her sheet of blonde hair.

"Gentlemen," I started.

"And Lady," chimed in Steve, grinning at Sarah.

"Yes, and Lady, the name of the game tonight is Risk. Before we start, does anyone need a refresher on the rules?"

"Is it still legal to win? Because that will be my primary strategy," said Charlie.

"I would hope so. If I don't win how would the game ever end?" Sarah winked at Charlie.

"Any real questions then, or are we all set to draw for initial placements?"



"This is the game where you roll dice, and acquire territories, right?" Asked Steve.

"Yep, though in your case it will be roll dice, hand over territories to me, and cry deeply," said Charlie. Steve smiled aggressively in response.

"Well if there are no actual questions, let's get started." I handed out the cards.

In no time at all Charlie reigned over most of South America, plus a small force stranded in Madagascar. Steve controlled North America and Africa. Sarah became the warrior queen of Australia with holdings in Asia. Meanwhile, I fully fortified my presence in Japan. I also kept a good swath of Europe under my thumb.

Then the game was afoot. Charlie was the first to move. He took his time planning the attack.

"You see, I chose the blue army because they will crash across the board like a raging river," mused Charlie.

"Or they'll just sit there and evaporate like a slightly militant puddle," said Sarah.

"Or that, but probably not. I've become one with my troops, and I've passed to them my intense love of Tapas. They will never leave South America whilst my stomach growls for Justice."

"Aren't Tapas from Spain?" said Steve.

"Shh, you're revealing my grand plan. I now have no choice but to destroy you before you can discover the full extent of my devious machinations." Charlie failed to wipe Steve off the board. He managed to take a part of North Africa via his foothold in South America. However, it was at the cost of most of Charlie's main force.

"Well that wasn't really destroying me, but you may have broken statistics. That was at least ten ones in a row," said Steve.

"Whatever, your turn," scoffed Charlie. Steven made his moves with much less

exposition than Charlie. He settled for pushing Charlie out of North Africa and taking half of South America. He failed to decimate the small force abandoned in Madagascar.

"Where are your statistics now, sir!?" gloated Charlie.

"That was incredibly unlikely," mumbled Steve.

"What you know about Madagascar!? Step back, they mean business."

"You probably won't have anything other than that soon," said Steve.

"It's all about Madagascar in the end man, you just watch me."

"Well if you're both quite finished I think I'll take my turn," said Sarah.

Her march was a merciless one. After quickly connecting her holdings between Australia and Asia she expanded aggressively thorough the Middle East into Eastern Europe, knocking on the door of Northern Africa.

"That's a tough break Phil," said Charlie, "It's a fact - Sarah has the demon luck."

"That was a lot of sixes, damn," said Steven.

"Hrm, I might need to rethink my strategy." I said. I took a few moments at the start of my turn to survey the battlefield and recalibrate the plan. While none of the games we played were particularly competitive, I pride myself on an ability to win more than one quarter of the time. It wasn't a huge deviation from the norm, and if I hadn't mapped out the groups win-loss ratio in my black notebooks labeled "studies" there is a chance I might not have known I am exactly 23% over the group average. The puzzle pieces falling into place in my mind now, I mobilized. I pushed my army up through Alaska into North America. I finished my turn by fortifying my southern flank against Sarah's main force.

She had a nasty habit of being unpredictable.

"That should do for now, I think," I mumbled into my vodka.

Sarah smiled at me as she took a sip of her drink.

The following rounds were as kind to Charlie as the first.

"I don't think your troops will be dining on Tapas this game, dear," said Sarah.

"I am not a woodland creature made of delicious venison, and furthermore, my Madagascar strategy will pay off in the end, baby."

"I'm sure it will. Won't it?" Sarah giggled.

Charlie had all but given up any shot at legitimately winning the game, but there was no way he was going to give up. At the very least he refused to be defeated by Steve. Charlie noticed the way he glanced at Sarah tonight. Charlie and Sarah weren't dating anymore, they hadn't for some time, but that didn't stop Steve's little remarks from annoying him.

"Fuck it, I'm coming for you guys. My brave Madagascar Legionnaires! I shall rescue you! We shall eat Tapas as a family again!" Charlie split his meager holdings in Argentina and attempted to break out into Africa. "There must be a better way to roll these dice. I've perfected the art of rolling ones at the very least. Sarah, you never did teach me the secret of sixes," said Charlie, rolling a handful of ones.

"It's a closely guarded secret. I'd have to paint your nails and kill you if I told you."

"Sounds kinky. I might be up for the first part if that's what you're into," said Steve with far too little sarcasm in Charlie's opinion, judging by the way his eyes narrowed. Charlie's next roll went rogue and landed in Steve's gin and tonic.

"Watch it man!" Said Steve, jumping

up, "These are new pants."

"My bad, clearly the dice were thirsty."

"I think they need a different drink. Snake eyes on the bottom of the glass," said Sarah.

"And thus ends my glorious charge." Charlie excused himself to clean off the dice and get Steve a new drink. He and Steven used to be much closer friends, then Sarah broke up with Charlie. Steve's transparent pursuit of Sarah strained the friendship to the breaking point several times. For the most part they managed to stay fairly civil. Except in Madagascar.

I looked up and caught Sarah smiling at me. I looked down at the gameboard.

"Get back in here dude, I'm going to crush your hopes and dreams," Steve yelled to the kitchen.

"And you're welcome for the gin," said Charlie, setting a fresh glass on the table for Steve.

"It's my gin," I said. Not that I minded, but I felt like it would be to awkward to not point the fact out.

"Very much not the point," said Charlie.

"Are you ready to lose Madagascar ol' chum?"

"Come at me bro."

Twelve times Steve sent his forces against the small dot of blue holding the island and twelve times Charlie came out ahead.

"God dammit! I don't even have words."

"I do! What you know 'bout Madagascar?! Uhhhh! Yes. This is how it happens guys."

Sarah just shook her head in disbelief. The rolls were pretty unbelievable, but what really got to her was Charlie and Steve's petty fighting. I could tell by the way she looked at them. She and Charlie had only dated for three months before it became clear to her the two of them were

not mean to be. She was aware Charlie and Steve had an agreement that Steve would back off before they had started dating. They called it the bro-code or something similar. Once they broke up it became increasingly apparent that there was no way she could have Steve without also alienating Charlie. So in an effort to keep the peace she endeavored to stay friends with both of them. It worked for the most part. They had these game nights primarily because she suggested them; Sarah loved games, Charlie and Steve loved Sarah. I could tell she wasn't exactly sure why I liked game night so much. I just liked having people around, the small apartment seemed a bit bigger with all those loud drunks in it.

Sarah had built up for a while and was now ready to sweep southward. In one turn she took most of Africa, South America, and even bits of North America. She even expanded a bit north into Asia to take Ural.

"Who takes Ural?" Said Steve.

"No one takes Ural," laughed Charlie.

"It's not very good, tactically," I agreed.

"Whatever," smiled Sarah.

I had a few cards in my hand and decided now was the moment. Cashing all the cards in at the start of my turn, I received ludicrous amount of reinforcements. I had calculated Steven and Charlie were far too scattered and under-enforced to put up much of a fight. More importantly, I observed that Sarah had far over extended her troops. Exploding across the map, I took North America, wiping the last bits of Steve's forces from the map. With the reinforcements from Steve's defeat, it was easy to quickly take Asia, Australia, Europe, and South America then back the remnants of Sarah's forces up against Madagascar. The only move Charlie had

was to attack through Sarah's last troops, something I knew he wouldn't want to do. I smiled quietly, knowing the game was mine. The voices in my head quieted for the trumpets heralding my imminent victory.

"Well, I think that pretty much settles it. Would you like to surrender together my dear?"

"I think I'll wait until my turn before I hand it in."

Charlie passed his turn. Sarah attacked Madagascar. Against her avalanche of sixes Charlie never stood a chance.

"What do *you* know about Madagascar?" mocked Sarah.

Charlie shrugged and finished his drink. With the reinforcements she took from Charlie Sarah was able to take Africa and hold it for a few rounds before I inevitably won. As I cleared the game board Steve and Charlie walked to the kitchen to get more booze. Charlie patted Steve on the back as they went.

My attention diverted as I felt soft skin brush my hand. I looked up. Sarah's eyes were locked on mine, a smile on her face.

**Chapter 3 or 4 or something:**  
**Schedules**  
*Jon Prapuolenis*

Another day had come and gone, still no sign of Price. I had asked around to see to whom he reported, but no one seemed to know. Apparently his boss had quit years ago, but Lawrence just kept coming to work. There had never been any problems and things got done, so no one ever bothered to look into the situation. As best as I could tell no one had ever known him to miss a day.

At home I stared at the notebook lying on my table. I had respected Price's privacy up to this point, but my urge to snoop had never been so great in my life. After I had determined the ownership of the thing, it had been left undisturbed in my small kitchen. There it remained, perfectly in the center of the small crappy table where I took most of my meals. The sun was setting fast and before I knew it I was sitting in the dark, losing the small black book in the fading light.

I stood up and turned on the bulb over the table. The light hung just a bit too low overhead, drowning the surface and chairs in a puddle of luminescence. As I leaned against the refrigerator in the deepening shadow, I thought the notebook looked a bit mysterious, almost sacred. The reflective black-leather cover winked at me in my corner. Grabbing a beer, I sat down as though the book was a blind date I had intended to stand up. I reached forward and pulled the book in front of me. I took a sip and contemplated.

I am cautious about violating others' privacy. I had a bad experience once, so suffice to say I stay on the safe side of situations such as these. It's amazing what someone can figure out about a person from just noticing the things they do right in front of you. So I figured that, in most

circumstances, any prying into personal lives was just asking for trouble. But still, the notebook called to me. It became easier to rationalize. What if Lawrence was hurt? What if he had quit and didn't remember where he had left the notebook? What if he knew I had his book and was waiting to ambush me one dark night? What if there was a reward? Most of all, what if this little book held the key to answering the question that was Lawrence Price?

Finally I decided to read it. If he was hurt, I had an obligation to make sure there was nothing wrong. After all, what if he had written "Gone to meet my mortal foe, be back home by eight, mop in front of café next morning by seven sharp." I opened the notebook to the page marked by its attached thread. Much to my disappointment I was greeted by a calendar of last week. It was meticulous in every detail. I took another sip and tried to make out his handwriting.

\*\*\*

Monday:  
Wake: 5:00am  
Birds sing outside: 5:03am 82% (✓)  
Shower: 5:00-5:30am  
Squirrel on fence: 5:52am 27% (x)  
Leave for work: 6:00am  
Arrive at work: 6:17am 58% (✓) 6:28am ( )

...

\*\*\*

It seemed to show every single action that he performed on the days in question, down to the most seemingly random. I couldn't figure out why he had written in percentages of some things. Maybe he wrote down what he thought the odds of that thing happening were. Perhaps he was testing a hypothesis, or maybe chronicling his observations for some big secret project. I looked over the book again. There seemed to be no

unifying idea between all of the inconsequential entries.

I flipped back earlier in the book and found more of the same. In tiny handwriting, he had packed in every single thing that had happened on every day chronicled in the book. Spills and their locations, events and their impact on his duties, even instances of lingering eye contact and the possible meanings. Next to each entry that could have had multiple outcomes he would list the two or three and put percentages. Next to one would be a check and the others would have an 'x' next to them, though always in a different color ink than everything else.

It was fascinating to see the weeks before through Price's eyes. I looked farther back in the book for my birthday, a few months before. My boss had set up a small party after work. There had been a cake, candles and some type of anchovy creation that was surprisingly good. Sure enough, there was mention of it in Price's notes. He had devised that there was a 24% chance that I would drop my cake and a 93% chance that I would look up at him as he mopped. He had also written in, in the same color ink as the checks and x's, "strange rough feeling."

Flipping through the book I found a few more notes written in with the same color ink. Mostly it was the same sentence here and there, sometimes contracted to "S.R.F." On occasions where he had listed two possible outcomes but both were "x," he would write "Perhaps too bold." I flipped past the bookmark and noticed the notes stopped. Curiously enough though, nothing else did. With the same level of specificity, the notebook chronicled the remainder of the year. The only thing missing were the checks or x's and the odd note.

I sat back, confused. How? Did he have some sort of insight into what each day

would hold? I looked at the week to come. Evidently he had assumed he would be coming to work, as the notebook listed his activities and observations as if he expected to do them. He had mentioned the incident on Monday. Did Price know Sam? Had Sam told him what he planned to do? Two more notes from that week caught my eye. It said on Thursday I would stop by Price's apartment. On Friday, it declared, I would quit my job.

I stood up and got another beer.

## **Musings in a Cold Store on a Warm Night**

*Jon Prapuolenis*

The summer air was thick and humid. It vibrated with the drone of the many cicadas. I like it this way, sort of like I'm wrapped in a tingling blanket. I currently felt more like I had my head under the blanket. We walked towards the automatic doors, blinking from the bright lights of the grocery store.

It was late, so they had blocked the typical entrance with shopping carts. As I entered the exit I grabbed a shopping cart. The A/C was up so high the entire place felt just short of frosty. In shorts, sandals, and a light shirt, I suppressed a shiver. The cart now the typical weight, we started forward.

It was nearly two in the morning, but I didn't need to be up until late tomorrow, well today technically. I would have rather been back at my apartment, but we were out of toilet paper and bagels. Essentials - so this couldn't wait till tomorrow. I had a large amount of reading to do and what I calculated to be an even larger dump to take, so it was just me, the restocking employees, and my Bear walking the empty aisle of the cold store this warm summer night.

No one really paid attention to us as I pushed the squeaking cart up and down between the imposing shelves. In the deserted store they caused everything to echo eerily. My loose sandals smacked the ground and reverberated upwards as a bad 80's power ballad drifted down. Cecil would say that's redundant, a bad 80's song, as if there were any good ones to begin with. He could be quite judgmental for an 800 pound pink Polar Bear.

We cut through the pet food section on our search for the toilet paper. Beniful,

Fancy Feast, and Beggin' Bacon Flavored Dog Snacks slowly scrolled by.

"Hey Cecil, want some Purina Bear Chow?"

"How very droll, as if," scoffed Cecil. Not laughed, chortled, snickered, or giggled; scoffed. That's just how Cecil was, or at least as long as I've known him. He's the kind of guy who made a point of eating every meal with silverware, pairing the appropriate wine with his dinner, religiously avoiding contractions, and in general looking down on people. A feat that isn't too difficult when one is over seven feet tall, but that's beside the point. He got on my nerves sometimes, but I guess if you hang out with someone long enough you start to see past some of their minor flaws. Or at least you end up having to.

We arrived at the primary goal of the trip, a towering display of TP. Without thinking, I grabbed the softest looking stuff within arms reach.

"You cannot be thinking of purchasing that."

"What?"

"I have told you this before, I find that brand deeply offensive. I would no more wipe my hindquarters with those vulgar sheets than imbibe that dreadful Coca-Cola beverage."

"Oh, I forgot you hate it when they use Bears to advertise."

"They are not Bears so much as crude caricatures of my people. It is insensitive and intolerable to anyone with any sensibilities."

"All right, all right, I'll get a different kind. Budge over, would you?"

Cecil was seated in the center of the cart, hunched forward a bit, like a pretentious teddy bear. A comparison I kept to myself, as he absolutely hated Theodore Roosevelt. He yelled "Bloody Progressive!" anytime his name came up.

There wasn't really enough room in the cart so Cecil agreed to hold the paper in his lap.

When it came right down to it, Cecil's airs of grandeur were put aside when it came time to solve a problem. I don't know if other people can see that about him. Most people try their best to ignore the sometimes-condescending things he says, but they go a bit too far. No one really takes the time to get to know him, get past his quirks and see the value in Cecil, The Economist reading, Sommelier Certified, and just all around interesting Bear. By just pretending he doesn't exist people can miss out.

With our TP and Bagels we make our way back to the front of the now quiet store. The stereo high above the shelves sputtered out while we were debating if more cream cheese was needed, so now our cart squeaked into the lonely silence.

The Cashier watched us blankly as we made our way over the long stretch of shimmering cement floor to the register.

"Find everything you need?"

"Yeah. Bit cold in here isn't it?"

Unamused, he rang up my items. I reached for my pocket and realized I had left my wallet at home. "Aw crap, I think I left my money at the apartment."

"Allow me." Cecil swiped his card before I could stammer my awkward plea. "Just toast me one of those bagels when we get back home."

"Thanks, I owe you."

It's probably not surprising, but when there's a problem it's nice to have a pink Polar Bear named Cecil around. We walked out into the warm night smiling.

## **Chapter 9: Smooth orbs, clean slates, and rough beginnings**

*Jon Prapuolenis*

We sat across from each other.

Lawrence looked off into the corner of the room. It was nicer than I had imagined, the room that is. Tastefully decorated with matching chairs and drapes. A sort of brown pin-stripe. His chair looked like mine felt, smooth leather that seemed to lack an edge.

"So," he said, straightening his suit compulsively, "Today is really today then?"

"As best as I can tell." I had so many questions. Where had he been all of this time. Why was he back here after having fled, or at least appeared to. Who were those men with knives? Where did he get these chairs? They were preposterously comfortable.

"What... are you?"

"So that's how you would like to lead off then?" Lawrence smiled slightly in recognition.

"I don't mean to be rude, but it seems as good a place as any to start."

"I am just a man, in the end that's probably why recent events have unfolded the way they have."

"The notebook-"

"Do you have it? I would guess you would have had to in order to find this place."

I pulled out the small black book and handed it to him. He flipped it open to the worked page. A look of recognition crossed his taught features.

"How many days from the last entry?"

"You stopped annotating half way through last Friday, so about seven days."

He studied the next week very carefully. With a knowing smile he snapped the book shut.

"This is all quite unusual, it seems I've missed a number of things."

"You've been gone for a week."

"Well yes, but things have occurred that I've never seen before. It's been quite a while since that happened."

I stared blankly at Lawrence. He smiled maddeningly back.

"Are you some sort of soothsayer? Or Prophet? Are you from the future or something?"

"Not really, no, and technically no."

"What?"

"Well, you've read my notebook, I assume that it's pretty self-evident." He stopped and rubbed the arm of the chair, contemplating. "Though I guess I've really never shown it to anyone before..." He suddenly stood up looking absolutely scandalized. "Is it possible that you are not aware of my condition?"

"Very possible, in fact, likely."

"I've been incredibly incomprehensible then. My sincerest apologies." With that he fell back into his chair, utterly crestfallen. Silence swallowed the room for what seemed like a very long time. I finally inquired about Lawrence's condition.

"I don't think there is an official term for it, but I like to call it being Temporally Imbalanced."

"Unblanced? Are you crazy or something?"

"Crazier by the day, but that's more of a side-effect than the root of the problem."

"So what does being temporally unbalanced do to a person?"

"Well, in my case, it means that every time I go to sleep I have a chance of waking up in either the past or the present."

"Huh."

"It's quite inconvenient. As I've gotten older I'm lucky if I can live two days that are actually 'today' in a row."

"So you have seen the future?"

"Probably, large bits of it actually."

"And the past? You've seen ancient civilizations with your own eyes?"

"All the way back to 1986."

"That's not very ancient."

"Admittedly, no, but I'm pretty well versed with everything that has happened between then and now."

I rubbed the arm of my chair. It was ridiculously smooth.

"What's the 30<sup>th</sup> century like?"

"No idea."

"But I thought you had seen a lot of it."

"I've seen tomorrow until April 1, 2042."

"That seems like an odd place to stop."

"That's the day I will die."

"What?"

"I only see days between the time I was born and the day I got shot in a pet store." Lawrence must have read the quizzical look on my face because he continued, "A bizarre hunting accident I think."

I blinked, trying to clear the confusion out of my eyes. I tried to take in the implications of what Lawrence was saying. I failed miserably.

"Why wouldn't you avoid going to a pet store in the future?"

"Well there are a couple of reasons actually."

"Such as?"

"Well for one, I love hamsters. The work they do with wheels, just brilliant."

I didn't know how to respond to that.

"I guess another is that I'm not one-hundred percent sure I'll be shot."

"But you—"

"The times I lived through April 1, 2042 were always a bit rough." Lawrence



looked at me as though somehow that answered my question.

"I've confused you again, haven't I?" I nodded. "What parts did I lose you on?"

"Times?"

"Well I can live the same day, past or future, multiple times. It's almost always annoying. I once spent nearly a year sick with the flu during a heat wave during which the air-conditioning went out right as my fever peaked. It was terrible."

"So if you live a bad day multiple times, why don't you change it?"

"Sometimes I do. If the day feels particularly rough I go out of my way to have fun with it, as nothing I do will connect with anything."

"Rough?"

Not every day I live really did or really will happen. If I concentrate I can mostly tell how true the events I am experiencing are. On a day in the future that doesn't occur, like when a massive pandemic kills off most of the population, I feel a rough sensation moving against the front of the orb of my mind. On a day that will likely occur I feel a smooth sensation on the front of my mind. The stronger the feeling, the more likely the day will occur."

"Huh."

"Yeah."

We both sat in silence for a moment. It was a lot to take in. Though I have to admit the idea of varying degrees of false past and present was an interesting concept.

"That sounds very complicated to keep track of."

"That is why I keep such a detailed notebook. It allows me to both keep myself on track in the present as well as better judge the degrees of truth to odd temporal days."

"It must have really sucked to lose it then."

"You have no idea. It was more than twenty years of false days between last Friday and Saturday. I was quite lost. There aren't many days in my life I haven't lived through at least once, and very few events I haven't seen come to pass in the continuum. So to lose something so vital, and unexpectedly, was quite a shock." He rubbed the arm of his chair and smiled. "It has made me realize something important... but that brings me to my proposal to you. I need someone who would help remind me of things like what day it is and what color the sky is. I was hoping that person could be you."

That was unexpected. I didn't know what to say."

"If you're worried about compensation I have personal funds enough to provide a decent salary. I held my job mopping was mostly because I found it calming. I had a good number of smooth days studying the stock market."

I thought about the idea of being a quasi-Time Travelers personal assistant, it would certainly break up the monotony of my structured routine.

"It could be interesting..."

"So is that a yes?"

I thought about Lawrence's prediction for tomorrow.

"I think the answer is already in your notebook."

**Eye c a b**  
*Jon Prapuolenis*

There are a million little differences between you and I, and likely even more similarities, though these might be subtler. I, for instance, enjoy and endeavor to keep a large percentage of my blood inside my body at all times. I am told this is a trait most people have in common when it comes right down to it. But for all the billions of intricate character features, foibles, and faux-paux that make up an individual, there seem to only be two types of people in the world.

There are people who notice a bee in the room and those who do not. It seems a dubious statement. A sweeping generality that leaves little room for context and specific details, I know. Generally, I shy away from absolutes of any flavor in categorizing things, let alone people. However, in every interaction I can recall there has been a distinct split between those aware of the bee, the wasp, or the yellow jacket and those who are oblivious.

But all this is far too abstract. Allow me to delve into a situation a bit more specific. Picture a tile floor, four non-descript walls bathed in florescent light. A ceiling that looks like squares of granola-flavored cardboard, or perhaps cardboard-flavored granola. A ceiling criss-crossed by a grid of tin and a number of listless crevices from which the flat soulless florescent bulbs infused the room with its flavorless illumination. It is a room that must have been designed by a very boring person on a gray dreary day.

The room could have been one of many from my school days, sprinkled with cheap plastic desks half-heartedly pretending to be wood. It could have been any room, but it wasn't, I'm almost sure of it. As time passes it will doubtlessly blend with all of the others.

On this day I found myself in one of those unfortunate desks and let the bland lecture flow over me in a inoffensive wave, not unlike the lights glaring down. I still remember the subject of the class, linguistics. It was something that stuck in my mind because I still can't come up with a word to describe it.

It was interesting but tedious. Dry but personable. A waste of time but I found myself utilizing its trivia long after the desks were ablaze. With all its talk of phonemes, glottal stops, sociology, and neuroscience, it was odd that the class could not provide me with a way to translate my thoughts on it into more concise verbal ques.

Anyway, sitting in that class, one warm spring day, I looked up. The air conditioning was wither broken or mercilessly denied to the building. It was so hot that the projector affixed to the ceiling was threatening to melt. At least it said as much in its multilingual warning message that appeared over some slides of phonemes. Bouncing lazily across the ceiling was a large wasp. The stinger hung under it like a hypodermic needle. I could feel it looking at my eyeballs.

No one else seemed to notice a thing. A roomful of sweaty perturbed 20 some things staring at a blank screen. I was alone.

For the next few minutes I alternated glancing at the wasp and pretending to notice the slide. It stayed on the other side of the room, bouncing dumbly off the ceiling. The muffled tap of its thorax against the ceiling was deafening. But still, only I seemed to notice.

When I was a child I sometimes would be sent to stay with my grandmother. She was quite old and not very personable, but tried her best to pretend to be. Her apartment was small and hot, with furniture older than my parents sitting in dust older than I was at the time. I remember sitting on the cement-like couch and staring at the wall. Of all the walls in the house it was the second most interesting. I managed to conclude this after the second visit. This wall had a long series of shallow wooden shelves running all along it. They were made from a wood that always made me think of the place that my grandmother talked about in her sleep. The shelves smelled musty with age.

Atop these wooden planks were a variety of small items going nearly to the ceiling. A tiny clay bird sat near the window. A tarnished gold lighter shined mutely on the shelf nearest the floor. During the hot

summer days I would sit and stare at the items over the course of hours. This did not fill me with any particular joy, but after my experience with the screen door on the other wall it was enough.

One day, early on in my visits to the apartment, I stood in front of the screen. Looking out the sun filtered in. There was no breeze. One day I might remember the thoughts I had then. I stood with my face pressed against the screen. I heard the buzzing but I don't think I cared. I blinked.

In the classroom the wasp continued to bounce along the ceiling. I had no real reason to follow its movement too meticulously, it's not like I was allergic, but I watched it nonetheless. It disappeared inside one of the lights. In the second row, five seats in front of me I saw someone look up. He wore a pretentious hat and suspenders. He looked back down.

Why do Weebles wobble at all if they don't plan on falling down? Who likes short shorts? If I lost my mind where would I begin to look for it? All these questions fill me up like some sort of frothy porridge. It sloshes around my mouth and down into my belly. If I sit still enough I can feel it slowly creep down my leg and roll around in my shoes. They are sticky questions. Questions that don't need to be answered and I question why I questioned them at all in the first place. But such is life.

Down the wasp spirals, in a languid circle, moving almost purposefully towards a girl with spaghetti-strapped shirt. Or are they called blouses? I would have asked the wasp after the fact but I don't believe we would have seen eye to eye. Her shoulders seemed to glisten in the uninteresting light. Maybe she was a goddess. Maybe she was anointed with oil. Maybe she needed to shower. The wasp moved towards this fleshy light.

It is curious, how the climax, the end of a thing, no matter how obvious or uninteresting, draws a person like a moth on a mission. You could be almost certain that you know what will happen. How it will be a waste. How it will bore you. But still, if you take a person and throw them in a chair pointed at a screen or a page with something

about to happen on it they will be inclined to see it through to the end. All just to see if it went the way they expected. They are annoyed if they guessed right, more so if the end veers away from all expected outcomes. That is why I generally stick to throwing chairs instead of throwing people into them. The ergonomics never match with specifications. If enough thought is applied it will all fall into place nicely.

Anyway, the girl died. She was apparently very allergic to wasp stings and could not get epinephrine in time. It was all very sad. The sting pierced her right shoulder. She rolled on the floor, expanding and red. The fuse was set and lit, she exploded. Flames lapped like small dogs all around me as everyone screamed or sang Ke\$ha songs. That is what I remember, but I am often wrong. Or at least that's what people tell me. I'm wrong. Also they say that I am a yellow taxi. But that doesn't make any sense. Does it?